
In June 2004, evidence of Ronald Reagan’s divided legacy could be seen across the United States. Whilst ‘hundred of thousands clogged the freeways of Los Angeles and the streets of Washington to salute the flag-draped coffin, others condemned…Reagan’s insensitivity to blacks, gays, women, and the poor’ (p. 4). These competing visions of Reagan’s legacy are even more evident in the scholarship on his presidency and on the decade he presided over, and Gil Troy’s *Morning in America* promises the reader a history willing to acknowledge the complexities of both the man and the decade. Instead of producing a standard biography or presidential history, Troy assesses Reagan in terms of his relationship with the decade ‘he dominated and helped define’ (p. 4). Rather than discussing this relationship as a top-down exchange Troy suggests that the Reagan presidency both shaped and was shaped by popular culture in the 1980s. Thus this book gives equal weight to the Iran-contra scandal and *The Big Chill*, to supply-side economics and ‘New Coke’, to perestroika and ‘Thriller’.

This union of cultural and presidential history is a promising premise, and Troy’s treatment of the 1984 Olympics and Reagan’s ‘Morning in America’ presidential campaign are skillful assessments of both electoral politics the lack of a popular mandate for Reagan’s second term. That said, there are ongoing problems with many of the discussions of cultural exchange. At times it is not clear why popular shows and products are included, for they seem to tell us nothing about Reagan’s role in inventing the 1980s or about his presidency. A case in point would be the discussion of *Hill Street Blues*, which is linked back to the purpose of the book with the tenuous idea that ‘the crime, the chaos, the fear, the diversity, did not fit into Reagan’s narrative’ (p. 113). Troy’s analysis of popular culture is generally limited to a two page discussion of one show or movie which bookends each chapter, a cursory way of documenting a decade. This kind of approach to culture is not particularly convincing, and Troy trends a fine line between attributing the popularity of such shows to Reagan’s vision of America and treating the two areas as completely separate.

Troy calls on historians to be sensitive to the complexities of the 1980s and the Reagan presidency, and he persuasively argues that an understanding of Reagan’s presidency cannot be gained by simply listing his attributes. He suggests that Reagan was neither a right-wing ideologue nor simply an ‘aging movie star’, and by drawing on extensive research at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library he asserts that Reagan was ‘a thinker, a writer, an engaged politician’ (p. 9). Troy argues that Reagan’s ‘combination of visionary rigidity
and tactical fluidity reinvigorated the presidency’ (p.5), and whilst this willingness to compromise may sound like a negative character trait Troy sees it as a key factor in Reagan’s ongoing popularity. Reagan helped pioneer the merging of popular and political culture, and some of Troy’s most convincing analysis comes when he suggests that Reagan’s influence is still evident in American society today.

Troy paints his picture of the 1980s with broad strokes, and it was enjoyable to read an account of the Reagan Revolution that goes beyond the workings of the White House. However, scholars of conservatism may find Troy’s treatment of political legacies cursory. It seems rather a stretch to assert that Reagan was Barry Goldwater’s less ‘grumpy’ heir, especially since Goldwater was a frequent critic of Reagan and the New Right’s ideas about legislating morality. Similarly, to allocate so little space to the role of New Right ideologues such as Richard Viguerie and Paul Weyrich seems to be denying their role in popularising the new economic and social conservatism that marked the 1980s.

Troy is ultimately writing a redemptive history of the Reagan presidency, but he distinguishes himself from conservative historians such as Peggy Noonan and Peter Wallison who make ‘Reagan Churchillian when he confronted the Soviet Union and equally Churchillian when he compromised’ (p. 351). Troy is willing to acknowledge Reagan’s failings and complexities, but in the end the characteristics he attributes to Reagan are often so broad (and contradictory) as to be meaningless. A case in point would be his claim that, with Reagan’s odd mixture of:

Tradition and modernism, idealism and materialism, nationalism and selfishness, moralism and libertinism, integrity and artifice, and in foreign policy, aggression and appeasement, Ronald Reagan invented early twenty-first-century America as well as the 1980s (p. 333).

Prose such as this is repeated throughout the book, and leaves the reader with little understanding of the Reagan presidency or of ‘the Gipper’. Despite Troy’s stated intention of writing a more nuanced history of the Reagan presidency there is still an implicit assumption that every ‘positive’ outcome during the 1980s was somehow linked to Reagan’s ideology, and every negative was the result of the excesses of the 1960s, a perspective that seems in keeping with the traditional Republican assessment of the Reagan years.

Troy’s treatment of liberalism and the after effects of the 1960s is also disappointingly dismissive. Writing of the Culture Wars, he claims that ‘feminists, African Americans – note the name change – gays, and lesbians…reduce[ed] everyone to their basest sexual and racial identities’ (p.
269). His discussion of the 1990s and the Clinton era is also philosophically problematic. He suggests that:

The eighties may have only really begun in the nineties, and the nineties became what critics had feared the eighties would be. With the Democratic opposition stilled – because the Democrats in power were the party of prosperity – the society plunged headlong into an orgy of hedonism (p. 327-8).

After an entire book praising Reagan’s form of moderate conservatism and the ensuing social and economic changes that this produced, this casual treatment of events that could arguably be declared after effects of the Reagan Revolution makes Troy’s writing seem rather one sided.

Whilst there is a need for indepth accounts of both the political and social aspects of 1980s America the dual focus of this book leaves this reviewer wanting more insightful analysis. This book tells a common story about the Reagan presidency, and will no doubt prove a popular seller in light of the accolades reaped on Reagan at his funeral. However, this is ultimately a book that makes too many generalizations and omissions to be truly satisfying to an academic reader.

Prudence Flowers
University of Melbourne


For many years, debates about the urban/rural divide have been extensively rehearsed in discussions of Australian identity, nationalism and multiculturalism, yet few studies have explored in depth the development of Australian rural culture. In this context, Richard Waterhouse’s The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia emerges as a complex discussion of the social, cultural, and to a lesser extent, economic, influences on the development of rural Australia’s multiple identities. Emphasising from the outset and again in his epilogue, that ‘the Bush was never united by a set of common values, a sense of shared purpose’ (p. 274), Waterhouse instead aims to reveal and analyse the multiplicity of events, peoples and experiences across the theatre of rural Australia. That the vast area of land known as ‘rural Australia’ should be a source of so much of Australia’s popular imaginings of national identity, whilst holding only a very small percentage of Australia’s total